Working Through the Shift: How the Loss of Motivation Affects Academic Success

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**Abstract**

This case study examines the word choice habits of Anastasia\* (not her real name), a freshman college student repeating ENGL110 after failing it her first semester. Anastasia’s writing tendency is to use weak words that do not convey a strong meaning, or use too many words making her sentences long and confusing. She has very good ideas, but because of these issues in word choice, most of her ideas do not come out in a reader-friendly format. While addressing these issues, Anastasia’s loss of motivation became apparent in our meetings. She began to arrive late or not at all, and lost the desire to push herself during our meeting times.

In this study I discuss what it means to be a teacher-researcher. I also discuss the ways her word choice issues were addressed, and how her loss of motivation affected our meeting agendas and her overall improvement in writing. Finally, I examine the way I handled the situations presented to me, and discuss how I will improve in further teacher-research practices, and how the conclusions I draw from this study will affect my future classroom.

**Introduction**

*“On this day, Morrie says that he has an exercise for us to try. We are to stand, facing away from our classmates, and fall backward, relying on another student to catch us. Most of us are uncomfortable with this, and we cannot let go for more than a few inches before stopping ourselves. We laugh in embarrassment.*

*Finally, one student, a thin, quiet, dark-haired girl whom I notice almost always wears bulky, white fisherman sweaters, crosses her arms over her chest, closes her eyes, leans back, and does not flinch, like one of those Lipton tea commercials where the model splashes into the pool…*

*For a moment, I am sure she is going to thump on the floor. At the last instant, her assigned partner grabs her head and shoulders and yanks her up harshly.*

*“Whoa!” several students yell. Some clap. Morrie finally smiles. “You see,” he says to the girl, “you closed your eyes, that was the difference. Sometimes you cannot believe what you see, you have to believe what you feel. And if you are ever going to have other people trust you, you must feel that you can trust them too – even when you're in the dark. Even when you're falling (Albom, 1997)."*

Life is filled with frustrations. Teaching, especially one-on-one, is filled with frustrations, perhaps even more so than classroom frustrations. When you only have one person to worry about, you know it’s either their fault or your fault when things don’t work. Sometimes you can be going along, working well together, and all of a sudden everything falls apart. Frustration sets in, you try new things, and nothing seems to be working. But sometimes, you have to trust the process. And trust that at the end of the process, something will have worked. You just had to wait for it.

**What is teacher-research?**

Teacher-research, especially with a stranger, can be a lot like a trust fall. It can be hard to trust the process, or that the issues will ever be corrected. New ideas can be explored, but ultimately both parties involved must have a desire to want to improve. In my work with Anastasia, I quickly identified a major issue that needed to be addressed in her writing was word choice. She agreed that she had a difficult time choosing strong words to convey meaning, so we set out to work at strengthening this skill. But as our meeting times went on, she began arriving later and later, sometimes even cancelling during the times we were supposed to be meeting. When we did meet, our meetings became shorter, because of her tardiness, and less productive. She had lost focus and it was my job to bring her back in.

The process of teacher-research was foreign to me. Most people going into the teaching field have some sense of what is expected of them to be an effective teacher. However, many future teachers do not consider the research part of their job. By considering their role to be one of teacher and researcher, the "traditional descriptions of both teachers and researchers change. Teacher-researchers raise questions about what they think and observe about their teaching and their students' learning. They collect student work in order to evaluate performance, but they also see student work as data to analyze in order to examine the teaching and learning that produced it (MacLean & Mohr, 1999)." This method of analysis better equips the teacher to uncover and differentiate instruction to meet individual student needs.

**How did I approach my role as teacher-researcher?**

As a teacher-researcher, my first job was to observe my partner, look at her writing, and talk to her about how she feels about writing. I started by giving Anastasia a Reading/Writing Survey. In her survey, she indicated that a writer was “a person who has the ability to write when asked or just for fun (Appendix A),” and that she considered herself a writer. The remaining answers to the survey questions were short and sterile. When asked what she would write about if she could write about anything and be paid for it, she answered that she would “write about dance. Its history, its relevance, and what it does for those who participate in it (Appendix A).” While I know she loves dance, the answer to this question told me that she has not been given much of a chance to write creatively, and therefore assumed I was asking her what topic she would write about in a class essay-style writing piece.

My second job was to formulate a plan based on her needs. At our first meeting, Anastasia told me she was very eager to improve her writing, so to make sure we had plenty of time to do this, she and I agreed to meet every Tuesday and Thursday at 12 pm. It gave us about an hour each time we met. She had been assigned three essays to write during the semester: a summary and annotation of an article, answering a question from an article, and taking a stand on an issue presented in an article. I knew working on her assigned papers was a big part of what we would do during the semester, but I also wanted to build her confidence and creativity in her writing by doing writing exercises not associated with her assignments. My hope was that in doing these fun exercises she would be able to stretch her writing beyond academic writing, and also start to see the difference in word choice in academic writing versus in informal writing.

**Who am I?**

I never considered myself a proper writer. Why? Because I did not have a firm grasp on grammar rules. I am, however, a business writer. I can write a program grant that changes the lives of children in the community. I can design a brochure that entices donors to give just a bit more. And I can spin an event flyer to entice people to squeeze an artist lecture into their already busy schedules. But name the rules of grammar being used in a piece of writing? I could not do it, so I figured I was not a proper writer.

I was worried about this project. I was sure my writing partner would know more than I did, and I would be no help to her at all. In fact, I was convinced I would get to our first meeting, she would find out I was a fake, and I would fail the project because I would have nothing to write about since I was not able to help my partner. I even decided to bribe her at our first meeting by bringing her a drink from Starbucks.

At our first meeting, Anastasia and I took to each other immediately. We had similar personalities, and I found her positive attitude towards improving her writing refreshing. I knew that for this partnership to be effective, we would need to spend some time learning to trust each other, specifically her learning to trust me. Building a relationship must be the first step in setting up a writing community. Without this relationship, she would not trust me to help her become a stronger writer. From the beginning, she knew that I cared about her success, not only because I told her I do, but because I showed her I do. My first step was always to praise the successes and point out the accomplishments in her writing before we moved on to making corrections. I wanted Anastasia to have the power in her writing, so revision changes were always suggestions. I made it clear from day one that I am there to help her, but she is the author of her work, and her voice needs to come through.

**Who is Anastasia?**

Anastasia is a second semester freshman from Germantown, Philadelphia. She is polite, well-spoken, and enthusiastic about her education. She is majoring in Accounting because of her love of math, but she wishes she could make a career of being a dancer. This is her second time taking ENGL 110. She expressed frustration with the professor the first time taking the course. She felt the teacher was very hard and asked the students to complete tasks that were too advanced for their level. In her own words, Anastasia said, “I do math. I needed more help with English (Fieldnotes, 2012, p. 26).” Anastasia was very open and honest about needing help with her writing. She was excited to begin the process of improving her writing. She told me that she likes to challenge herself even if it means making more work for her.

**How did we find our focus?**

Anastasia was very aware of her issues with writing; however, she thought they were limited to grammar and punctuation. The most prominent issue in Anastasia’s work is her word choice. She has a tendency to use weak words that do not convey a strong enough meaning in her writing, or she uses too many words making her sentences long and confusing.

**Why does word choice matter?**

At our first meeting, Anastasia allowed me to read the first draft of her essay. As I read it, she said,” I know there are mistakes in there,” referring to the punctuation and grammar errors marked by the Professor (Field notes, 26). In her first essay for ENGL 110, she was asked to summarize an article on the ethical balance between humanitarian support and research in post-earthquake Haiti. She had some very good points to make, but needed help expressing them in a way that is appropriate for college-level writing. Our focus for the editing of this summary was word choice with an emphasis on choosing words to strengthen it as an academic piece of writing. She had made the summary conversational, like something that was taking place between two friends. She used phrases like “…the topic of seeking a balance between humanitarian service and research is brought up (Appendix B)” when describing the main idea of the article. We discussed what it meant to write a piece that was more formal and condensed, instead of two pages of repetitive sentences and lengthy explanations, which were, in her own words, a “way to make the paper fit the prescribed length (Field notes, 27).” We also talked about the importance of using strong and concise words when writing. I explained to her how the importance of her sentence diminishes when she says a topic is “brought up.” It sounds like the topic is something briefly mentioned, when in fact it was what the entire article was based around that proposal. This one slip in word choice could have changed the meaning she was trying to convey, simply because it made the author appear like they were giving an informal opinion rather than a researched-based opinion (Field notes, 143). After discussing the ineffectiveness of the phrase “brought up,” Anastasia and I decided that using the word “proposed” would allude to the fact that this is a scholarly article, and the author was writing it after careful research, not just an opinion piece.

In Vickie Spandel’s piece, “Six Traits of Writing,” she defines word choice as “the use of rich, colorful, precise language that communicates not just in a functional way, but in a way that moves and enlightens the reader (Spandel, 1).” She also says that “Strong word choice is characterized not so much by an exceptional vocabulary chosen to impress the reader, but more by the skill to use everyday words well (Spandel, 1).” Anastasia’s biggest challenge in her writing is her desire to use words or create sentences that dazzle when she should be focusing on using everyday words well.

**How did we address word choice issues? What other issues were exposed?**

During our first meeting, I had given her an assignment of making her own life map to complete so we would have a place to start from for writing prompts. I also asked her to fill out the Reading/ Writing Survey. When we met again, she had forgotten to do both, so I asked her to do them in preparation for our next meeting. I was a little surprised that she had not completed them because she had been so ambitious about improving, but I knew she was busy so I did not think it was a problem.

At our next meeting, Anastasia still had not made her life map or filled out the Reading/ Writing Survey. Because I needed to have this information, I gave her time to fill out the Survey during our meeting. When she was finished, I asked her to make a life map, and she thought that was going to be too hard for her in a short amount of time. I explained that it did not have to be anything elaborate, but she was not interested in doing it. Instead, I asked her to make a list of things that bug her. That was much easier for her to do, so she completed it in five minutes. We then took a few minutes to freewrite before moving on to her essay.

Her second essay involved reading an article and picking a side to back from the article. Anastasia had some issues with comprehension, so she was going to the Millersville University Writing Center each time she received an article in class. The tutors in the Writing Center worked with her on finding and highlighting main ideas and supporting materials, which helped her to understand the articles and be better able to express her ideas on paper.

After her times in the Writing Center, Anastasia would sit down to write her essays based on what she and the tutor had worked on. She took detailed notes during those meetings and then put them all in her essay in a somewhat structured form. She included very little analysis or support from the essay, and much of her writing sounded like the conversation that she had had with the tutor.

Because of this, much of our word choice corrections came during the revision process. Like many students, past revision processes have really just been another read over to find any blatant spelling or sentence structure mistakes. The mistakes in Anastasia’s papers include things like run-on sentences, incorrect punctuation, misused words, and a lot of good ideas that are worded and structured in a confusing way. Anastasia needed a way to focus her revisions, so I introduced her to the STAR method of revision. I thought this method of revision suited her because she is a visual person so being able to correlate the letters with the actions to take on her papers will be helpful to her. It also gave her the freedom to choose whether or not she wanted to use the suggestions we discussed when she made her final changes.

The STAR method proved to be an effective tool for her to use. Using this method we took a long, unorganized paragraph and broke it into a concise opening paragraph. In her first draft of the essay, she posed multiple questions and gave a lot of data, but never really got around to fully introducing the article she was reading or what the purpose of the article and her paper was (Appendix B). After many revisions, her final paper had a more concise introduction (Appendix C). She got rid of many of the unnecessary words, phrases, and even sentences that she used to make her paragraph look longer.

Anastasia’s tendency to over use words in a sentence is evident in much of her writing. In her essay on “Physical Therapists in Post-Earthquake Haiti: Seeking a Balance Between Humanitarian Service and Research,” her second sentence is an example of the kinds of sentences she constructs (Appendix B). The sentence reads:

*When the earthquake occurred there was an abundance in the amount of people willing to help rebuild immediately.*

Through discussion I taught her that an abundance is a large amount so restating “in the amount” was not necessary to strengthen the sentences; in fact, it was adding words that did not belong. Her new sentence became:

*When the earthquake occurred there was an abundance of people willing to help rebuild immediately.*

In a dual attempt to make her writing sound more professional and fill up more space, Anastasia makes the same mistake many others make by adding words to sentences that have no use in the sentence and do not help the flow. In her second draft of the essay on “Physical Therapists in Post-Earthquake Haiti: Seeking a Balance Between Humanitarian Service and Research” (Appendix D), she included a sentence detailing the author’s purpose for writing the article:

*He makes it clear that the purpose of his writing is to make it known that it is of a major importance for physical therapist to seek balance between humanitarian services and gathering research by boldly adding it in sub headings and giving it visuals of what the patients have to work/navigate through on a day to day basis (Figure 2, pg. 975).*

Several lines later, she also included a similar sentence:

*The purpose of this editorial is to let it be known that physical therapist should be seeking that balance between helping those [in] need and gathering research.*

I started the discussion about these two sentences by asking her why she included them. She told me she was supposed to include the purpose of the article in her summary. And she rather sheepishly added that she needed to fill some space, so she restated the purpose. We discussed this sentence in two parts: the mechanical and grammatical issues of the run-on sentence and the inclusion of several phrases that were unnecessary, and the proper way of defining the purpose of the essay.

Because these were Anastasia’s papers and she ultimately had the final say, she had the option of leaving in the long run-on sentence, but I had a duty to explain the error to her. In our time together I gathered that Anastasia knows how to write a proper sentence, but she tries too hard to add words to make the sentence appear more academic. After seeking guidance from Jeff Anderson’s *Mechanically Inclined,* I used other sentences from her paper as a mentor text to illustrate how she had already created proper sentences (Anderson, 68). We discussed the option of adding punctuation, removing words, or removing the sentence altogether. I also pointed out that the purpose of her essay was to summarize the entire article, so she can explicitly state the purpose, but she should also be using details from the article to support and show the reader the author’s purpose for writing the article. In her final draft of this essay, she took out the first sentence and kept the second sentence, instead using images from the article which helped deliver the message more clearly (Appendix C).

**How did loss of motivation affect the desire to confront academic struggles?**

As our meetings continued, it became more and more apparent that Anastasia was losing the motivation to improve her writing. Anastasia was arriving to our meetings later and later. She was originally only about 5-10 minutes late. Then it became 15 – 30 minutes late. I became very frustrated when she arrived 45 minutes late to one of our meetings.

I often felt like I was hunting her down. I started sending her friendly text messages to remind her of our meeting times. Even then, she would often tell me she was running late, but only because I contacted her first.

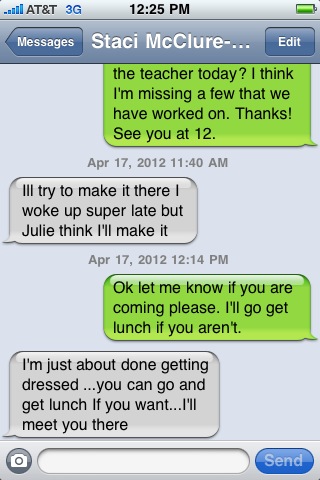
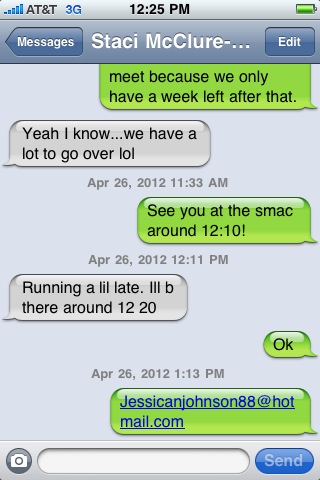
Exhibit A

Exhibit B



I resisted the urge to feel disrespected by her lateness, and instead tried to figure out what was causing this loss of motivation. Anastasia had spoken to me several times about her growing disinterest in Accounting, and her desire to transfer to a school with a dance major so she could focus on her dancing. My advice to her was to do some soul searching and weigh the pros and cons, but in the meantime remain focused on her current schoolwork because no matter what she decides, schools will be less likely to accept her if she failed her classes. She seemed to understand this advice, but it did not stop her tardiness.

The role of teacher-researcher can be difficult at times, especially in an environment outside a classroom. There are lines I did not think I was supposed to cross, but I felt that the constant lateness needed to be addressed. I was not sure if it was my place to say anything to Anastasia about being late every time, but I also did not want my time wasted. So I chose to approach it with humor by joking about getting her alarm clock fixed before our next meeting. She seemed to take the hint, at least that time, because she was five minutes early for our next meeting.

I also started noticing that Anastasia was less motivated to work hard in our meetings. During a meeting to brainstorm supporting arguments for her final essay, she was tired and not in the mood to participate. As the semester was winding down, it was important for us to make good use of our time together. However, because I am outside of the classroom, she really does not have to participate in what I’m suggesting we do; but I did not want our time wasted. After several suggestions about how we could approach our brainstorming session, I finally asked if she would like me to write down her ideas as she says them. She liked that idea so I began writing to get her started then handed the tablet and pen back to her so she could continue. I was bothered that I had to do something as juvenile as writing while she talked, but I did not want to lose another session with her. That was the best thing I could think of to motivate her at that moment before she shut down entirely.

**What are the implications from this study?**

My time with Anastasia taught me a lot about myself as a teacher, but also about how I will approach issues in my classroom. My confidence in my teaching ability was raised, despite the motivation setbacks along the way. In discussions with Anastasia about her writing, she began to be able to point out when she was making poor word choices and even give suggestions about how she could correct it. Many of these changes made it into her papers which gave me hope for her future writing endeavors.

One of the most important things I learned from Anastasia was the need to find ways to keep the students motivated. During our time together, I became focused on trying to work through her papers to improve her grades (she never received above a 68 on any of her papers submitted), in our increasingly smaller amount of time. As our sessions grew shorter, I stopped putting an emphasis on freewriting. I made this decision for two reasons: she was not interested in freewriting and I wanted to have as much time with her as possible to revise all of her papers. Unfortunately, I missed an opportunity to model writing for her in an attempt to grow her interest in her writing.

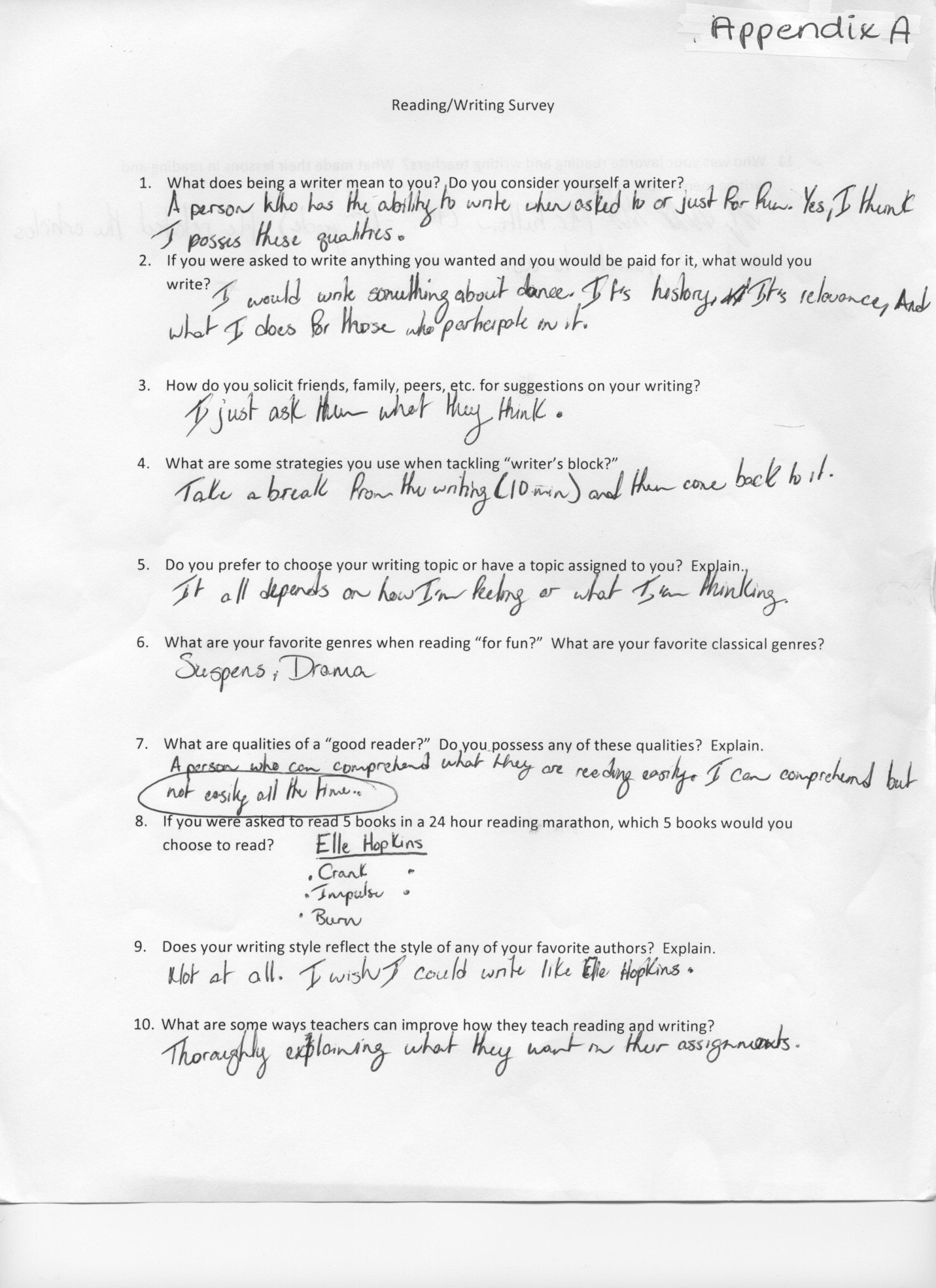
This decision is one that I’m sure I will have to make in the classroom. As my time with my students is infringed upon for various reasons, I need to remember the importance of giving the students time to write what they want to write. As Nancy Atwell reported (1987), “… [my] students’ newly found devotion to writing comes not only from the freedom to choose but from the time to exercise that freedom” (Milner & Milner, 2012, p. 346). I will need to make a conscious effort to incorporate and keep freewriting time in my classroom. While I know that much of Anastasia’s loss of motivation was based on outside sources, part of my responsibility as her teacher was to try and make our meetings a time she looked forward to participating in.

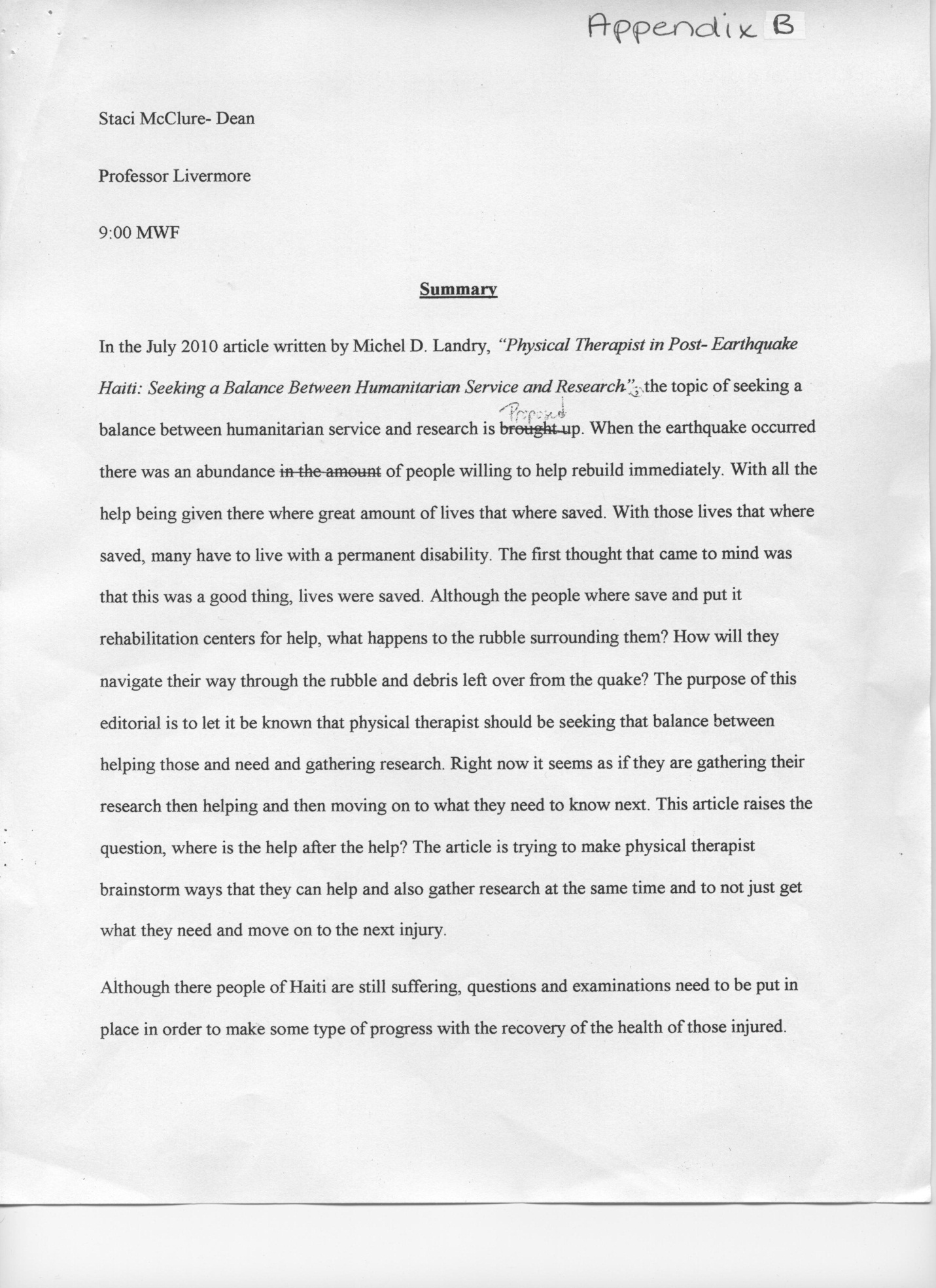
**Conclusion: How will this project help Anastasia’s future?**

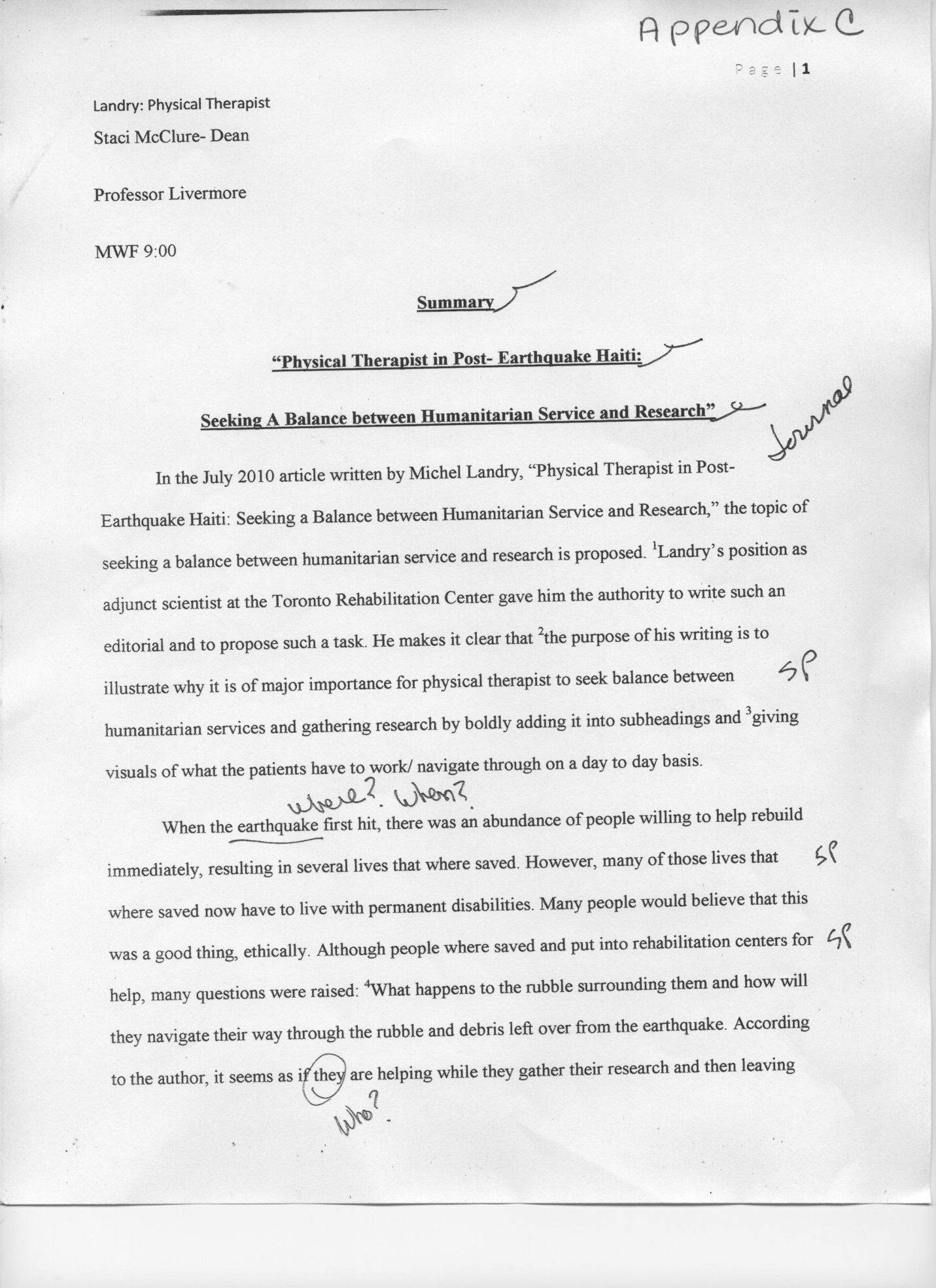
Anastasia is currently planning to be in the Accounting field after she graduates. According to a 2003 study by the National Assessment of Adult Literacy (NAAL), adults with “stronger literacy skills are more likely to be employed, to have higher-status jobs, and to earn significantly more income. They were less likely to receive public assistance (or if they had, did so for a shorter period of time) and less likely to say their reading and computer skills limited their job opportunities (Jerald, 37).” Depending on the area she works in, she may be required to write proposals for clients, Annual Reports for donors, or articles for the company newsletter highlighting quarter-end results. Today’s job market is tough, and having strong math skills will not be enough to push her in front of another person competing for the same job. Anastasia must have a strong overall skill set, including the ability to write in a professional manner.

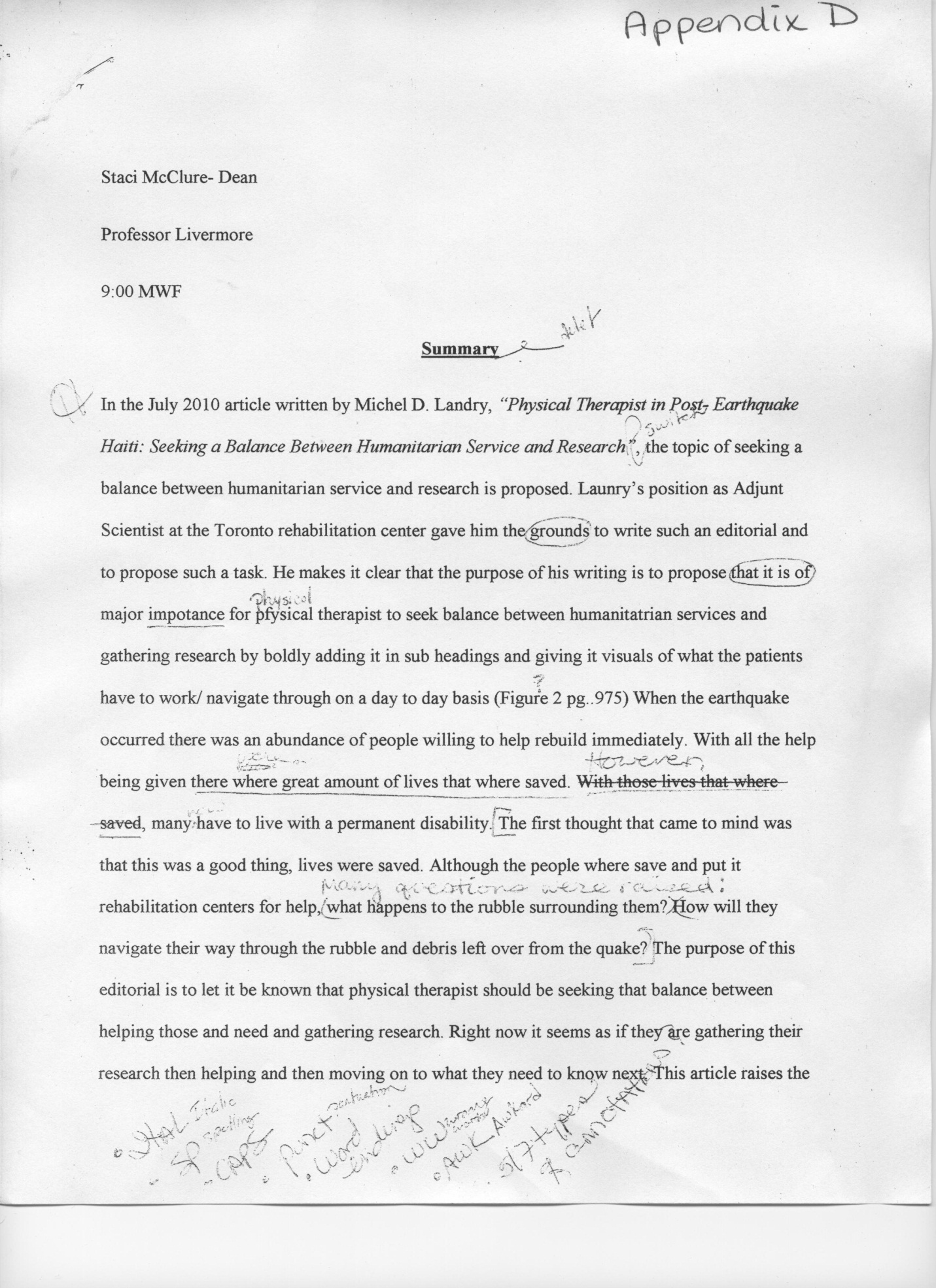
In the article “Real World Writing: Making Purpose and Audience Matter,” Grant Wiggins says, “Persuasive and informative writing for speciﬁc and real audiences are common. More generally, in real-world writing “audience” and “purpose” are not mere buzzwords; they are task-deﬁning: the consequences of your writing matter for a speciﬁc audience in a speciﬁc situation. A recent report from the National Commission on Writing underscores the point: Close to 70% of responding corporations report that two-thirds or more of their salaried employees have some responsibility for writing, either explicit or implicit, in their position descriptions. More than half of all responding companies also report the following forms of communications as required “frequently” or “almost always”: technical reports (59%), formal reports (62%), and memos and correspondence (70%) (Wiggins, 2009, p. 31).

Winston Churchill said, “Continuous effort - not strength or intelligence - is the key to unlocking our potential.” In our final meeting, Anastasia expressed nervousness at needing to write for her future job. She understands this will be expected of her. As someone who has spent time in the “numbers” field, I was able to tell her the types of writing she will be using in her chosen profession. By relating the need for clear, concise writing in accounting she was able to connect much of what we worked on to her future (Field notes, 2012). She is also positive that over her remaining three years in college, she will improve her writing by using many of the techniques we discussed. As we said our goodbyes at our last meeting, she hugged me and said, “Without your help I would still be writing like I used to. You have taught me so much and I know I’m a better writer because of it (Field notes, 2012).” Although there were struggles along the way, hearing her say that was one of those times when I know the frustrations were all worth it.









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**Appendices**

Appendix A: McClure-Dean, Staci. 2012.

Appendix B: McClure-Dean, Staci. 2012.

Appendix C: McClure-Dean, Staci. 2012.

Appendix D: McClure-Dean, Staci. 2012.

**Exhibitions**

Exhibit A: April 17, 2012. Text message between Anastasia and Jessica Johnson.

Exhibit B: April 26, 2012. Text message between Anastasia and Jessica Johnson.